

THE ESSENCE OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY

BY ELBRIDGE COLBY.

AUTOBIOGRAPHIC memoirs are about the most interesting books in the world. Of course, the thing can be overdone, and it often is overdone. We have had inflicted upon us too many Reminiscences of a Busy Life, too many Memoirs of So-Long-a-Time in the United States Senate, too many Stories of a Theatrical Career. But, out of the cumbrous library, which a book-buyer interested in this kind of thing might easily collect, we can choose some volumes of real interest. The interest would be of two kinds—interest in the facts and interest in the personalities.

As far as the interest in facts is concerned, memoirs and autobiographies are of value to the historian, to the literary critic and to the gossipy individual. But this interest is a temporary one, or it is inspired by the particular purpose of the reader. I mean that any one who reads the *Apology for the life of Colley Cibber*, the *Memoirs of Thomas Holcroft*, the *Recollections of a Literary Life* by Miss Mitford, *Education of Henry Adams*, the autobiographies of Mr. Roosevelt or of Mr. McClure; the *Memoirs of the French Revolutionist*, J. P. Brissot; *The Wandering Patentee of Tate Wilkinson*, strolling prayer; the *Confessions of a Convert*, by Mgr. Benson, and the *Trip Around the World*, by General Grant—any one who reads these things reads them for particular facts about certain countries of the earth, for particular facts about the stage or about politics, or for particular facts about these particular persons. The impelling motive is the insatiable curiosity of the gossip, who wants to know what card party the housewife next door is going to, or it is the spirit of investigation of a scholar trying to accumulate details of information opposite to his field of research. But both of these motives are, as I have said, of a temporary character. When the specific purpose is accomplished, there is no longer any stimulus; and so the interest in the search for facts lags when

the facts are found. Encyclopedias and Handbooks of Useful Information are often consulted, but never read as literature.

If, however, we stop for a moment to consider those few books of an autobiographic character, where the main interest is an interest in personality and not an interest in facts, we must find a different means of interpreting and analyzing the effect of the writing upon the man who sits in his armchair and reads. In this case the reader projects himself into the story instead of bringing the various incidents to himself. I do not make myself quite clear, so I shall explain by an illustration. Serious plays are of two kinds: Those emphasizing characters and those emphasizing situation. The second kind is called melodrama. (I exclude the farce because it is not a serious type). Now, the essential reason for the perennial popularity of the melodrama lies in the fact that the person in the orchestra chair, or in the last row of the gallery, projects himself into the story and shares in the anxieties of the actors. The man in seat H-105; he is the hero of the melodrama. A man may sympathize with, and may even deceive himself into thinking that he understands Hamlet; but he can never be Hamlet. But every man in the house who sits through the thrilling scenes of "Life" is Bill Reid himself. Why? Is not "Hamlet" a play of character and "Life" a play of situations? Exactly so. The man Hamlet is an extraordinary character subjected to extraordinary situations; and the man Bill Reid is an ordinary character subjected to situations which, however extraordinary, any one in the audience might conceivably have to face. Hamlet entangles himself in difficulty; Bill Reid is entangled by the tall suave villain. Bill Reid might be any man—the man in H-105, for instance; Hamlet must be Prince of Denmark. And the greater universality of the appeal of "Life" as compared with that of Hamlet is due to this fact—the man in the orchestra chair may conceivably place himself in the part of Bill Reid, because Bill Reid is a type of character often found.

Now, when we read a book, that book will have the most lasting effect which contains a character similar to our own, which relates incidents in which an ordinary man, the mythical man-in-the-street, might be engaged. We like that book best, to use a newspaper phrase, which has the most human interest. And "human interest" means an interest in things which appear to be common to all of us. The most curious paradox of the whole situation rests on the fact that the drama of situation is a tale of a usual personality, and the drama of character—being the story of a curiously changing and un-

usual character based on certain assumed conditions, and circumstances—is really a tale of unusual fact.

Then, when I say that I rank the drama of situation first over the drama of character as appealing to the commonality of mankind for its popular appeal, and that I rank the autobiography of fact second to the autobiography of personality on the same basis, I run a grave danger of being misunderstood and of being called inconsistent. I might have made my comparison simpler, more conventional and more readily acceptable by reversing my analogy, but I am convinced that this is the correct interpretation, and shall continue to explain my reasons.

You ask me first what I consider the type of the autobiography of personality. The answer is quite obvious. Take St. Augustine, take Cellini, take Rousseau, take Newman. These are autobiographies of personality. I reject Gibbon from the inner circle, because all interest in him is artificial and stands secondary to and dependent upon an interest in his writings; I reject Hume for the same reason and Mgr. Benson also; I reject Doctor Johnson, not because Boswell wrote the interesting details of that amazing life, but because our interest there seems to be the gossip's interest in curious facts and an unusual character. I fear that I must reject Benjamin Franklin's interesting record for the same reason; it is the unusual there that attracts, not the usual, the normal, the weak and the human thing. The distinction between the unusual in character (really a record of assumed fact) and what may well be taken as the typical in personality is a very fine one, but I believe it to be at the root of the whole matter. I believe that St. Augustine, Cellini, Rousseau and Newman represent in their autobiographies typical personalities. There are many men to-day walking the streets of this city, riding in the underground subway or in the erratic street omnibus lines, who represent the type of St. Augustine, Cellini, Rousseau or Newman. The man of Religion, the frontiersman of the empire, the eccentric, but brainy lay philosopher, and the thoughtful student; these are usual types of modern man. And any commonplace man of today might write his own life into a melodrama of unexpected situations, but never into a drama of character; into an autobiography of a mere human personality, but never into an autobiography of curious facts. He might easily have been a Bill Reid, but scarcely ever a Hamlet. He might be a St. Augustine, a Rousseau, a Newman, but never a Gibbon, a Doctor Johnson, a Tate Wilkinson, a J. P. Brissot, a Colley Cibber, a Mr. Roosevelt, a Thomas Holcroft or a General

Grant, globe trotter. Some things may possibly come to all men, other things can possibly come to only a few. The common element strikes a universal responsive note simply and solely because it is the common element; the recital of uncommon events meets a limited audience simply and solely because it is uncommon. The one answers a permanent interest in the heart, the other finds a temporary interest in the head. And, as the things of the heart are those which endure, the fame of a book which is a record of personality outlasts the fame of a book which is a record of fact. Matters of fact are of their own time, but matters of human personality are of all times and all places. That is why we stand these four great autobiographies up as monuments to that human nature which does not change. We may be charmed for a while by the record of fact, by what one man saw on his trip around the world or by what another man saw when he lived the life of a strolling player in eighteenth century England. But we are strangely moved by the record of a personality which reacts as we ourselves react. This is why there is something universal and lasting in the autobiographies of St. Augustine, Cellini, Rousseau and Newman.

But I may be all wrong. My analogy of the common appeal to the common human may not fit. So, before I leave off, I shall offer what I called the simpler, more conventional and more readily acceptable explanation. It is simply that plays which deal with character and autobiographies which reveal character (or personality) endure through the ages, while those which deal with facts and depend on situations do not. *Hamlet* is thus a play of character, *Life* a play of situations; *St. Augustine's Confessions* is thus a book of character, *Colley Cibber's Apology* is not. This explanation does not take into consideration the wide popularity of some plays of situations; nor does it take into consideration the artificial interest created by a "literary" study and continued critical "appreciations" of some plays which are nothing but character studies; nor does it take into consideration the fact that students are taught to admire certain things in the class-room and immediately go down town and spontaneously and honestly enjoy the exactly contrary things; nor does it take into consideration the psychological elements of mob-interest or the power of sentimental attachment which all human beings show, for some things, for courage, for honor, for truth, for justice; nor does it take into consideration the non-popular and professional stimulus given to the retention on the stage of difficult character-plays by the very fact of their interpretations being considered a standard of histrionic ability and so frequently attempted by

emulous and unmerciful actors. It so happens that these very four objections to this second, and conventional explanation, stand as excellent arguments for the melodramatic explanation. But, at any rate, it makes little difference which explanation we offer, and it makes little difference which explanation we accept. Much can be said on both sides. Both may be right; both may be wrong. It matters not. The four—St. Augustine, Cellini, Rousseau and Newman—still stand where they stood when I began to write out this argument. They are the best of their kind. And, as I said in the beginning, autobiographic memoirs are about the most interesting books in the world.